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SUBJECT: ATIKU TO CAMPAIGN FOR POVERTY ALLEVIATION, BUHARI
STILL THE ONE TO BEAT

Classified By: Political Counselor Russell J. Hanks for Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (C) In a meeting with PolCouns, a long-time aide to Vice President Atiku Abubakar described Atiku's campaign plans and said that the Vice President was ready to "beat (President Olusegun) Obasanjo at his own game." He also described 2003 ANPP Presidential candidate Muhammadu Buhari as "the man to beat" in 2007. Even though the aide struck a positive tone, the Vice President's confidence has been exposed to several miscalculations already. Obasanjo still holds many of the cards in the upcoming election cycle and could surprise his number two yet again.

¶2. (C) In a meeting with PolCouns, a long-time aide to Vice President Atiku Abubakar was eager to provide his assessment of the Nigerian political situation and share Atiku's campaign plans. He commented that Nigerian politicians were currently in a state of confusion and that he did not expect the situation to clear up until late in the summer. The aide speculated that both the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the main opposition All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP) were in "sorry shape" and that neither he nor the Vice President was sure that either party would be relevant in the next round of elections.

¶3. (C) According to the aide, Atiku (who is returning from the United States in the next few days) would begin campaigning soon after his arrival. He said that Atiku's platform would concentrate on poverty alleviation and ignore almost every other issue. "Nigerians need a simple choice and are tired of hearing that the gains of economic reforms will come if they are patient," he said. He commented that each leader of Nigeria for two generations had been promising to improve the lot of the average Nigerian, but until today none had produced the benefits.

¶4. (C) The aide said that Obasanjo had already begun efforts to hamper Atiku's ambitions. He claimed that the attempts to concoct a coup plot implicating the Vice President had so far been unsuccessful, but warned that Obasanjo was "still trying to fabricate something." He claimed that Obasanjo was also planning to use the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) to threaten the Vice President. "That will backfire," the aide averred, "since any deal Atiku was in, the President took a share." He said that Obasanjo had even tried to keep the Vice President from taking his vacation, phoning Atiku on his way to the airport and telling him to stay in Nigeria "because of new developments in the (Congressman) Jefferson investigation."

¶5. (C) The aide also suggested that the recent high profile activities of Transcorp, including the purchase of many governmental assets, would prove problematic for Obasanjo. "Everyone knows his stake in the company and the sales of oil blocks and, now, NITEL to them outside the established

procedures is too obvious to ignore," he said.

¶6. (C) The aide said that the President seemed "confused and unsure what to do about a handpicked successor" since each attempt thus far had been defeated. "Atiku still controls much of the party machinery and has the support necessary to counter Obasanjo's moves," he said.

¶7. (C) Turning to the competition, the aide said that northern candidates Bafarawa (Governor of Sokoto) and Marwa (former military governor of Borno and Lagos states) had no support and had been pushed into their public positions by people "doing the bidding" of President Obasanjo. He said that Bafarawa had recently approached Senate President Ken Nnamani to be his running mate in the newly registered Democratic People's Party (DPP), but that Nnamani asked him, "Why should I support a loser?"

¶8. (C) The real challenge in 2007, he said, was "the 2003 winner, Muhammadu Buhari." He said that Buhari still has the immense support among the grassroots in both the north and the middle belt. "If Buhari had a good set of advisers and enough money to operate, no one could beat him," he speculated. In the 2003 campaign, the aide continued, Buhari drew enormous crowds throughout the country, eclipsing the PDP turnout and worrying Obasanjo and the PDP structure. "He can draw the same crowds this time, especially since everyone is fed up with Mr. President," he concluded.

¶9. (C) COMMENT: Atiku's aide, primarily responsible for press affairs, was confident in his assessment that the Vice President could prevail. This assessment that the Vice President would be able to "beat Obasanjo at his own game," though, could be overly optimistic. Several times in the past year, Atiku has believed that he could maintain the

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upper hand in the PDP, but then saw his support evaporate through the re-registration of party members and Obasanjo's selection of party officials outside the convention process. Given Atiku's track record and the fact that Obasanjo still controls INEC, the EFCC and the security services, the Vice President could yet be surprised.
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